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Depopulation Threatens Russia 10 Ways, Moscow Demographer Says

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

Russia's population will continue to decline over the coming decades, threatening first some regions and then the country as a whole with depopulation, a trend whose consequences are both more immediate and more widespread than many now assume, according to a leading Moscow demographer.

In an article titled "The Social Consequences of the Depopulation of Russia," Olga Lebed of Moscow State University argues that "the demographic situation that has arisen in Russia over the course of recent decades has achieved such a critical point that it is impossible not to pay attention to it."

At present, even with immigration, the population of the Russian Federation is declining by almost a million people a year, she writes, and consequently it is time to pay close attention not just to the overall figure but to the specific consequences of the depopulation of the country. Lebed points to what she says are the ten most important consequences of this

trend.

First, along with the overall decline, differences in birthrates and survival rates among the indigenous ethnic groups of the country and among immigrant populations mean that depopulation will be accompanied by "a change in the nationality composition of Russia," with the titular nationality forming an ever smaller share.

Second, depopulation will threaten the foundations of the preservation of the titular nationality's "self-consciousness" and entail "the loss of national traditions," especially if, as seems likely, the majority nationality by the middle of this century will be a nation other than the Russians.

Third, she writes, depopulation will threaten the ability of the country to maintain its territorial integrity and the well-being of the population. Russia is already one of the least densely populated countries on earth, and it will soon lack the numbers of people needed to hold its current borders if they are challenged within or without.

Fourth, the country will face an increasing shortage of workers, a trend that will make it ever more difficult for the population to maintain its standard of living and force the government to withdraw support from the kinds of projects that could reverse this and other dangerous demographic developments.

Fifth, assuming that depopulation is combined with an aging population, the drop will mean that every remaining worker will have to carry a greater burden in order to support the non-working segment of the population. Besides sparking inter-generational tensions, this will depress the standard of living of most residents, with all the political consequences thereof.

Sixth, the depopulation of Russia is likely to be accompanied by a further exacerbation of the gender imbalance within the population. Not only will that make it more difficult for Russian firms to find men to do certain jobs, but it will mean that many women will find it difficult to find husbands. Both trends will force changes in gender roles, some welcome, others not.

Seventh, current depopulation trends increase the likelihood that ever more parents will outlive their children, something that will entail not only economic consequences but social and political ones that many believe will contribute to the atomization of society and any number of other problems as well.

Eighth, that in turn will lead, Lebed says, to "the replacement of family relations by social ones," with the family becoming ever less important as a socializing factor and other groups and institutions rather more. While that trend is already in evidence, she argues, depopulation will make it far more severe.

Ninth, she continues, the problems of socialization brought on by depopulation will lead to more mental illness, more anti-social behavior, and the need for more institutions to cope with societal breakdown, including but not limited to crisis intervention centers, more psychologists and psychiatrists, and so on.

And tenth, she concludes, the depopulation of Russia is likely to produce a variety of demands, not now in evidence, to engage in such "fantastic" population-boosting measures as state-supported "incubator" children, "hybridization of embryos," cloning and greater efforts to extend life spans and working lives.

Not all experts would agree with Lebed on this list, but many do &mdash she cites numerous authorities in her 3,000-word article &mdash and consequently, her list is useful as a way of going beyond the crude numbers concerning the current and what will in the future become an accelerating decline in the population, to the consequences of that decline for all concerned.

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